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Better Defining a Character Genius

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"Opera, to me, comes before anything else."

— *Mozart*

Mozart's ability for accurate characterization is, it seems, universally acknowledged. His portrayal of human characters equipped with realistic emotions and understandable reactions sets him apart from a great many other composers, as does his ability to portray as well the emotions of women, before unrepresented on the stage and indeed, remaining for the most part silent even in the greater societal context. But for all his revolutionary tactics in the presentation of realistic characters and the female experience, Mozart nevertheless appealed still to the eighteenth-century processes of characterization. Instead of supporting the realism in his characters, he admits their artificiality simply by articulating the disparity between societal reality and the idealism of which he writes, including not only equality between classes, but between the sexes as well. This incongruity of characterization and societal expectations is presented through an intriguing contradiction between character portrayal and the choice of librettos, at least in regards for what many consider his greatest operas, *The Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni,* and *Cosi fan tutte* . Why did Mozart attempt to render with validity the human experience if only through stock characters and grossly artificial and idealistic plots? If there was to be greater attention focused upon the female characters, why were librettos chosen which depict women in an unfavorable if not heinous light? By incorporating these contradictions within the framework of his operas, Mozart seems to negate that for which he was supposed to have strived: an accurate and valid portrayal of human experience, not an idealistic rendering of what that experience might possibly be.

The eighteenth-century audience to which Mozart displayed his works was an audience of diverse and demanding expectations. On the one hand, there was the aristocracy, the faction holding not only political power, but also social and artistic power over the popular aesthetics. As a composer it seems to have been understandably vital to secure the aristocratic audience by considering its values as presented by a musical piece. Believing that music "must never offend the ear, but must please the listener" (Wallace 36), Mozart reflected in his music those ideals which would appeal to the aristocratic audience: namely, those maintaining the status quo (36).

That Mozart considered his patrons and the powerful authorities which determined not only his salary but also where and how his works were performed is an obvious fact, as it was through these forces that he earned his living. It remained, however, a rather difficult matter to solve on the other hand, there existed as well the audience of the common people, holding common values and preaching the need for a reflection of the common life within art:

> Ordinary people clearly were interested in characters . . . who were, or were fancied to be, much like themselves . . . [t]he climate they created seems to have encouraged the popular arts, which were often experimental and even defiant of traditional forms, as prose fiction [as well as later musical works] was generally, and which deliberately addressed the interests of ordinary people (Beasley 11).

This was the audience which Mozart faced, an audience whose diversity created an instant conflict between classes and simultaneously presented a composer with an additional difficulty: to which

sect could he respond and continue a prosperous career? Mozart appears to have solved his personal dilemma by combining classes within his operatic works (for instance, the Count and his servants, Figaro and Susana) and displaying them attempting to successfully cope with the class conflict, while coping as well with emotions and reactions representative of the average individual. In this way, both sects found a voice through the operas which exemplified for the most part their class stations and consequent values. Mozart's ability to depict both sides of the coin is startling even today: "To a degree perhaps unmatched by any other musician, Mozart was able to embody personality and character, human conflict and resolution, in tones" (Wallace 40).

Mozart's process of characterization was in itself exclusively original in its rebellion against the characterization of the other eighteenth century court musicians, as accurately evidenced from a section of Scene iv of Act II of *Amadeus* :

> Tell me, no offence intended, but why are Italians so scared of complexity in music? They really are the most simple-minded people in the world. Tonic-and-dominant, tonic-and-dominant, from here to Resurrection! And their idea of character is just as boring. A Hero is ardent. A Heroine is innocent. An Old Man's a miser. A Duenna is conniving. Never the slightest contradiction allowed! . . . *I want to do a piece about real people!* And I want to set it in a real place. *A boudoir!* — because that to me is the most exciting place on earth! Underclothes on the floor—sheets still warm from a woman's body—even a pisspot brimming under the bed! I want life, Baron. Not boring legends. (Gianakaris 48)

Exemplifying not only the character of Mozart himself, from the above quotation Mozart's intentions towards character portraiture also become quite clear. It is the character, imbued with emotions and realism, which has made itself a priority within drama. But once again, eighteenth-century dogma figures in with the consideration of what type of backdrop is represented. Inasmuch as the characters themselves represent the attempt to accurately depict eighteenth-century people, "such characters emphatically reinforce our understanding of the degree to which politics, personal morality, and the pursuit of social identity were regarded as inseparable realities of human life in their period" (Beasley 12). Just as the audience is inextricably tied to the art of the composer, so is the time period an essential part of the art itself:

> Typically (but not always) immersed in familiar scenes of domestic conflict, such characters are most often used deliberately to reveal some vision of the degree to which private life is touched by external political circumstance, or to proclaim the value of the individual life in a world made hostile and corrupt by the moral failings of political leadership, or to echo by their experience in a miniature imaginary world the kinds of political conflict characteristic of the larger world outside the fictional boundaries of their stories. The type itself is familiar from the broader literary contexts of the period: the lonely, virtuous man or woman who is really an alien in a threatening environment, struggling to survive. (Beasley 11)

So the value of the individual is reflected in terms of its value against the popular culture of the eighteenth century and all that then includes, for instance, politics, art, and current beliefs and conflicts. Mozart's insistence upon the reality of the situation within his operas is then interpreted as being simply consistent with this kind of belief which emphasizes the importance of the individual operating within (or at the very least aware of) the popular societal dictates of which s/he is a part. To be sure, the characters Mozart has employed remain within the guidelines of popular eighteenth-century literature — not stock characters as compared with past centuries of characters, but created nevertheless to fulfill a distinct category representative of the eighteenth century and its changing controversies:

> they are characters projected to meet certain recurring rhetorical or dramatic needs, and not simply repetitions of conventional portraits of the corrupt minister, the crawling sycophant, the crafty practitioner of court intrigue, and so forth. (Beasley 4)

Mozart's process of characterization, then, while a rebellion against the older character forms, was an offshoot of the then current literary trend to endow characters with eighteenth-century values, perceptions, and thoughts. Yet while the idea for rebellion might not be attributed as completely his, he remains an initiator in portraying characters realistically within musical forms: "as a creator of 'living figures of flesh and blood' in Lyric Drama, Mozart has never been surpassed" (Biancolli 179).

That he was able to create these characters against an

atmosphere of stringent regulations is a credit to Mozart's genius. It has been said of the Classical period that the "[exploitation of] the natural opposition of tonic and dominant in a dynamic manner not realized by Baroque composers" (Jones 167) directly contributed to the insistence on stability at the beginning and, above all, at the end of each work. [This allowed] the classical style to create and integrate forms with a dramatic violence that the preceding Baroque style never attempted and that the Romantic style that followed preferred to leave unresolved, the musical tensions unreconciled. For this reason, a classical composer did not always need themes of any particular harmonic or melodicenergy for a dramatic work: the drama is the structure. (Rosen 76)

For many composers, the drama inherently within the structure of the musical composition was enough to reveal the drama of the actual piece. Opera was an art form specifically rendered, it would seem, for this very idea. Joseph Kernan agreed, asserting that "[b]ecause it excels at presenting the felt qualities of experience . . . opera can determine dramatic form in its most serious sense" (Hayward 316-317).

Indeed, although Mozart employed the dramatic structure commonly associated with the age in most of his music (sonata form), he must have understood the potential within opera for a greater drama and enlarged upon the traditional notions regarding its purpose with the result that his music reveals itself as outstanding and revolutionary in more ways than one, amongst them his willingness to compromise between the above mentioned class conflicts to include each and every voice of the period, even the feminine perspective.

Through his music, Mozart provided an art form which

allowed the speaking of otherwise silent voices, and in doing so, he truly initiated a rebellion against popular eighteenth-century values. Women, for instance, were considered by the eighteenth-century people to be weak, subservient, and plagued by a variety of disorders, as evidenced even by medical sources: "As to Females, if we except those who lead a hard and hardy life, there is rarely one who is wholly free from them [hypochondriacal complaints]" (Sydenham 235). This attitude is furthered by information gathered by doctors and climaxing with the following:

> [women's] capacity to exercise their mental faculties, to reason, could not always be taken as reliable . . . at a basic level — usually that of sexuality — women suffered from unmet needs, which could lead them to crave the fantastic. (Peters 440)

This condescending view of women culminated in the belief that "[a]t the same time that female afflictions demanded indulgence, they seemed also to require guidance and control" (440). Truly every aspect of the female experience was subsumed under this scientific explanation as it was revealed not only inferior to the masculine way to life, but pronounced women incapable of sane conduct whatsoever.

Mozart incorporates not only the eighteenth-century attitudes regarding political situations within his dramas, but attitudes concerning more personal matters as well. Female characters figure within his dramas as important personages, and at first glance they are capable and even independent. Because of these elements, "Mozart defined the human condition in his music" (Lipton 42) and

in many ways he emerged triumphantly successful from this endeavor. In other ways, however, because "*Le Nozze di Figaro, Don Giovanni,* and *Cosi fan tutte* exhibit an exceptional complexity of character and motivation [and] their plots contain many traditional and conventional elements" (Sadie 716), the disparity between character and the surrounding plot is perceived as grossly unequal and, instead of engaging the audience, distances them from not only the character, but also the action and emotional content revealed through the opera as it is essentially considered separate from real human existence.

But while this is indeed true, it is not to say that Mozart's operas are without value in defining the human condition. It is significant that all three of Mozart's operas, *The Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni,* and *Cosi fan tutte* derive from both the tradition of opera seria and opera buffa (Biancolli 176). Incorporating comedy in midst of near real conflict proves true the following:

> Each of Mozart's great operas has its unique personality; each helps us to understand some aspects of the human condition. *Don Giovanni* treats of love, lust and the destructive power of pride. *Cosi fan tutte* examines the connection between social mask and personal feeling [and] *The Marriage of Figaro* . . . is a study of a wide range of individuals interacting in a recognisable social situation. (Deane 27)

And when the combination of comedy and tragedy is coupled with the inclusion of elements of conflict not only between upper and lower classes, but also with men and women, Mozart's ability for effective characterization is again proved as "the creative genius not

only solves a problem, but his solution is an individual offspring with a life and character of its own" (Biancolli 175). Mozart not only presents the differences between two warring factions, but he attempts the solution of that conflict. Does he do so realistically? In hopes to ascertain an answer to that question we must first consider each of the operas, examining both character type and plot maneuvers.

Within *The Marriage of Figaro* , as in both *Don Giovanni* and *Cosi fan tutte* , there is an abundance of character and incident. Events move quickly by the audience, and "through da Ponte's skill and above all through the magic of Mozart's marvelous music all of the characters gain an added dimension of warmth and humanity" (Broder viii). The plot of this opera is specifically coordinated with the characterization, as reflected by the intertwining of the supposedly separate musical lines. Within the orchestral introduction, two passages appear, one to be identified with Figaro, the other for Susanna. As Susanna claims more and more of Figaro's attention and thoughts, their separate lines joins in "harmonious tenths" (Deane 18).

The coordination of these two lines specifically points as well towards Mozart's attempt to render the relationship through valid terms — how better than to not only illustrate the nobleman's inherent belief that his servant is his sexual property but also to delineate Susanna as a dominating force over the male-female relationship, before only dominated by the male? *Marriage of Figaro* thus interestingly combines differing perspectives on the issue of domination: what is it to be dominated by an upper class member? what is it to be dominant within a relationship supposedly sustained by love and equality?

The disparity between the classes and the power delegated to each is an essential part of this opera and, indeed, of the eighteenth-century way of life. Created to question the inequality between classes, Figaro is an innocent, seemingly unaware of the power the upper class commands at will as he cannot comprehend Susanna's reluctance to accept the bedroom provided for them by the Count. And again, the Count, while portrayed in a somewhat negative light, is not completely to be blamed when he preaches of his power, for that is the status quo of the period. This is represented with validity through Figaro's assertion, "That's what I call a nobleman: He just does what he likes" (*Figaro* 51), as that was indeed how things operated. And while this class barrier is never quite destroyed, it is surely questioned through such relationships as the Countess with Susanna. Sharing similar status as women in a traditionally male world, they share similarities that transcend the class barrier and allow them to acknowledge their essential sameness:

> Surely all women ought to support one another: when we think how we're treated by our husbands and lovers, oh, 'tis our duty. But we, poor hapless womankind, who sacrifice our all to men, Receive from them but perfidy and pain that's hard to bear. (*Figaro* 112)

Joined through their womanhood, Susanna and the Countess can together improvise plots (the Countess meeting the Count in place of Susanna), admire male figures (Susanna's frank appraisal of Cherubino as they dress him up) and maneuver around rules (such as the Count questioning why was Cherubino in the Countess' room,

partly undressed), but while "Susanna enjoys 'girl talk' with the Countess, she never steps over the class barrier" (Lipton 40).

However, while this barrier remains in place, the barrier between the sexes begins to be shifted. Wye Allanbrook's analyses of character are known as both "sensitive and original," (Webster 180) and she seems to have demonstrated through her work in *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart* that "it is Susanna's relations with Figaro and the Countess that are decisive, not those between the Count and Countess" (180). If this is true, and I shall suppose that it is since Allanbrook "bases her interpretations on close, in part original analyses of the music, with much attention to text and context" (180), the issue of equality/dominance has even more emphasis. What lends even further credence to this assumption is the fact that Allanbrook continues her argument with the assertion "that these two women are more intelligent than, and morally superior to, their men . . . and [she] interprets the whole action as a version of pastoral which celebrates the possibility of human affection" (180). This, I believe, is proved especially through the musical lines attributed to Susanna and Figaro and then through the character of the Countess. The Countess is presented as an "unequivocal personification of fidelity, devotion, love and forgiveness and fraternity [as directly opposed to the Count, of course] [and] Rosina's ethical stance creates an authentically 'enlightened' realm, one in which love, fidelity, forgiveness and honesty have their place" (Kinosian 1793-A).

Directly opposed to the Count's character and additionally to his attentions, the Countess stands out as a "good" character, though she may not exactly figure as a "strong" character (she does forgive and forget quite frequently). And as another example of the female, Susanna is presented as the dominant partner, attuned to the

realism of the class conflict and attuned as well to her own desires, all much more than Figaro attends to the issues: "I am Susanna, and you are stupid" (*Figaro* 23). The duet which opens the opera features both Susana and Figaro, each singing lines which "move in complete independence of one another" (Hayward 317). The fact that they each have a separate melodic line can only point to the notion that they are separate individuals, able to exist independently as well as within the structure of a relationship, reflected as "though they are out of sorts at first, by the end they have united in blissful thirds and sixths" (Webster 183). Indeed, "Mozart has devised musical means for expressing an idea about human relations . . . that with understanding discord can give way to reconciliation" (Robinson 18).

Reflected through his characters is Mozart's response to the varying degrees of inequality within life. Very much like life, the issues of equality, sex, and power stand out as important and decisive factors for the characters. As Gary Lipton maintains,

> *Le Nozze de Figaro* , like life itself, sways back and forth between certainty and uncertainty, comedy and tragedy. Instead of creating happy endings and bad guys vs. good guys, Mozart and Da Ponte give us remarkable human beings who sweat, struggle, and survive [and] [t]here are no winners or losers in *Figaro* , only slightly bewildered people who cope with the game of life. (38)

The "game of life" is a frequent theme of Mozart's operatic

works, appearing as well in both *Don Giovanni* and *Cosi fan tutte*. Much like *Figaro* again is the fact that *Don Giovanni* "is based on the tensions of class and sex" (Sadie 717). But where Mozart in *Figaro* featured characters which doubt the validity of their relationships by doubting the opposite gender ("Just the same is every woman, Frail and faithless one and all- 61; "Oh cruel husband, to reduce me like this! Did ever woman have to bear such a life of neglect and desertion, such jealous fury, such insults?"-102), in *Don Giovanni* he created one character in which these doubts are manifested in such a way as to repulse equally both sexes while still commenting on the class and sex barriers.

The character of Don Giovanni embodies not only the power of the upper class, but also the power of the sexually-proficient man. It is not surprising, then, to read that this "opera is full of contradictions and the central one [is] about the hero [as] from [the] doomed hero springs whatever is energetic and life-enhancing in the ensemble of men and women" (Hagstrum 323). Faced with the prospects of Don Giovanni, it is equally unsurprising that the servant Leporello alternately wavers between the intriguing possibility of becoming the nobleman with the ability to command at the dictates of his own will: "I the gentleman will play" (*Don Giovanni* 9), and the dictates which morality insists upon, causing Leporello to reveal "I will not have this mad-man for a master! (97). The ability Leporello possesses as a character able to change his mind, his emotions, and his actions sets him apart as a truly "normal man," as "in the fantastic world in which [*Don Giovanni*] is played, he is the one real person, the firm rock of reality in the midst of a dream" (Biancolli 264). This begins a difficult process of examination: if Leporello is the one "real" character of the opera, are the others to be consid-

ered stock characters? Louis Biancolli points to Mozart's tendency towards idealizing his characters as a possible answer:

> In *Don Giovanni* Mozart's power of character-drawing shows itself in all its glory. If, in *Figaro* , he has idealized some of the characters out of all semblance to their original selves, in*Don Giovanni* this idealizing process has been carried on lines exactly parallel with the original bent of the several *dramatis personae* and serves but more highly to potentize their individuality. Without losing a whit of their identity, without being one jot less sharply individualized, they rise to the stature of universal and eternal types. (185)

How distinctively peculiar! To not regard Mozart as a master in the art of characterization seems impossible, and yet it becomes necessary to see his art as creating identities for characters previously considered only stock. In short, he seems not to have created new characters, but to have revitalized the stock characters used within the past literary tradition. Indeed,

> each [character] is for [Mozart] simply a phase of life to be transmuted into a realm of art as good as any other. They or Leporello's garlicky vulgarity and pandering knavery, before Mozart's overmastering art they are all equal. (Biancolli 242)

This, however, is not to say that by idealizing his characters and

employing stock characters Mozart lacks to present the perspectives of many. Through the disparity between Leporello and the Don we are able to see the differences of class; through Elvira and Donna Anna we are presented as well with the female perspective. And yet, this perspective is sadly sublimated to the eighteenth-century ideals. Women are referred to as "dear, unreas'ning creatures" (*Don Giovanni* 163) and the belief that there is a standard to which women must measure up is reflected by the statement, "Thy unwomanly behaving makes me quite of thee ashamed" (81), as well as in "Hush! There's an odor, th' aroma sweet of womankind" (31).

There remain, regardless, women characters, most specifically Elvira, who are able to reach out to the audience and display a variety of emotions, not the least of which is their inclusion in the human world: like Leporello, who alternates between desiring to be a nobleman and a moral peasant, Elvira, though acceding the silliness of her continued passion for Don Giovanni, continues to love. Though Masetto said it of his bride, Zerlina, it might also have been said of Elvira: "When a woman's determined, who can stay her?"-111). Zerlina, too, acknowledges this same heartwrenching dilemma which faces Elvira with, "He doth use me most unkindly" (114). Both women are set up as parallel characters, feeling the same emotions, loving the same man.

As an opera based upon the female and her capacity to love, *Cosi fan tutte* prominently figures. It, however, is formed almost totally of stock characters, acting against a rather ridiculous series of events:

[The world of *Cosi fan tutte* is] scarcely a world at all; only a

> show of marionettes. For nothing could be more ridiculous than to pretend that the preposterous people, the still more preposterous situations of this utterly artificial intrigue were meant to be believed in. (Biancolli 274)

Yet for all its artifice, still the point of the opera is received and understood: "its wit enforces the lesson that human weakness must be realistically accepted and that romantic excess is ridiculous and fruitless" (Hagstrum 324). To be sure, however, the "human weakness" depicted throughout *Cosi fan tutte* seems exclusively female. It has been argued that "To Mozart's own public there could be nothing in the least shocking about that [the subject of feminine fickleness]" (Biancolli 272), and yet there existed as well the belief that "woman was an ideal that ought never to be made ridiculous" (Merkling 15). To which did Mozart subscribe? Perhaps he acceded to the truth in both ideals, as the following explanation offered by Frank Merkling asserts,

> There may be a double standard at work in [Don Alfonso's] little song ending with the words "Cosi fan tutte" — after all, though the women in this opera are maligned for being unfaithful, it is the men who are deceitful — but there's also wisdom in hisadvice that the men accept the women as they are rather than putting them on a pedestal. (15)

And what, indeed, is to be made of this Don Alfonso? Is he to be regarded as a true and accurate portrait of humanity or merely as another stock character within the story? It appears that both he and Despina stand out as "real," endowed with characteristics of normal

humanity that both the headstrong young men and the grieving girls lack. For who could doubt as real the urging of a younger generation to try new things, to not be overladen with the conflicts of the present? If nothing else, Don Alfonso and Despina are straightforward, offering what often appears to be cynical counsel simply because it is worldly and blatant, and set oddly against a background of artificiality (Biancolli 283).

As a consequence to all the artifice so grossly integral within the plot, the characters of *Cosi fan tutte* remain distanced from our version of reality, and the lesson that they teach seems simple and slightly stupid, but again, perhaps that was an intended insight:

> Mozart and da Ponte were not dealing here with recognisable human figures, as in *Figaro* , of with the creation of flesh-and-blood characters out of universal types, as in *Don Giovanni* .They were engaged in telling an amusing tale, for which a small group of stock characters were perfectly adequate. And some of these characters even come alive. Don Alfonso and Despina are as "real" as any characters in opera, and Fiordiligi is far from a puppet. (Broder 4)

And what of the feminine perspective? Maligned through both speech and example, "woman's famous faith and constancy" proves itself indeed as "a myth and fabrication" (*Cosi fan tutte* 18). And yet, through the counsel of both the male, Don Alfonso, and the female, Despina, both sexes are represented as unworthy and untrue. Where Don Alfonso advocates that "A man in danger, lost in the jungle's wilderness, or in a shipwreck is safer than the simpleton who founds his hopes on woman and her fidelity!" (72), Despina

encourages the girls to forget their beloveds: "Today you're loving one man, tomorrow another. One's worth the others, because they all are worthless!" (82-3). Moreover, the parallel characterization of Don Alfonso and Despina is further reflected as Despina asserts the power of the female over the male: "It doesn't take much wisdom, it's female intuition" (139) and Don Alfonso shortly after her recapitulates with "I have succeeded in fooling a thousand men — I can fool two foolish women" (141). Is Don Alfonso more convincing in persuading the female sex's evil? In any case, *Cosi fan tutte* , while presenting both the feminine and masculine perspective, leaves off with the unfortunate thought: "women cannot be faithful . . . You have to take them as they are . . . women always betray" (318).

Mozart is indeed a master at creating characters which are imbued with realistic and very human characteristics. By presenting the tensions of class and sex so inherently a part of eighteenth-century culture, he furthers this realism through his additional incorporation of elements of the female perspective. One of the few to attempt a realistic portrait of womanhood, Mozart, though he does accomplish truly moving emotional displays, nevertheless destroys the full intensity of his portraiture effect by placing his characters against other stock characters and/or artificially contrived plots. The audience remains distracted by this artifice and sadly unable to appreciate the full extent of the characters' humanness. As Louis Biancolli wrote, "Artifice is the keynote of it . . . At the same time, of course, [Mozart] infallibly hits upon the truth of his characters — the truth of their stage existence, which is all there is to them" (275). Such a part of life, Mozart's characters remain unfortunately tied to the stage and their stage lives — subject still to an audience of varying tastes and an overriding aesthetic which determines the

production of Mozart operas and the revival of his exemplary characters. Not much has changed since the eighteenth century after all.

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